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SUBJECT: UNHCR OPERATIONS STRUGGLING IN LIBYA; BUT OPTIMISTIC ABOUT FUTURE

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) During a series of meetings over the last three months, the Tripoli-based UNHCR representative, Mohamed Hantosh Alwash, has conveyed information about local operations and ongoing negotiations with the Libyan government to sign a Memorandum of Understanding. UNHCR's primary interlocutor in the Libyan government is Ramadan Irhiam, the Director of International Organizations at the People's Bureau for Foreign Liaison and International Cooperation (MFA). During the last three years, UNHCR has tried without success to negotiate parameters for its local operation. Currently the Libyan government does not officially recognize the office; it will not accept note verbale or other communications from UNHCR and forces the operation to function as a subset of the UNDP office, contrary to the UN organization chart.

¶2. (C) Alwash believes the Libyans have not been able to determine any benefit to having a UNHCR operation in the country. His goal is to use his contacts and local experience (Alwash worked at this UNHCR office in the 1980s and helped with the repatriation of Egyptians) to convince Libyans the UN exit strategies and voluntary repatriation solutions will solve its problem with a "revolving door" for sub-Saharan African economic migrants and other refugees. Alwash plans to give his MFA interlocutor, Irhiam, a draft paper outlining refugee problems faced by Libya, along with proposed solutions.

¶3. (U) UNHCR experiences visa problems similar to those of USLO and other missions. Alwash has one assigned staff member who has been waiting over seven months for permission to enter Libya. With his current roster of six employees (one stateless person, one Iraqi, one Sudanese, and three Eritrians), Alwash says he cannot begin to fulfill his portfolio of responsibilities for repatriation, protection and resettlement of refugees. He also said that UNHCR had been trying for over a year to send auditing teams to survey the local office's accounting, but the temporary duty travelers had not been granted visas. Alwash also said UNHCR tried to send a communications expert to set up computer operations, but the Libyans also denied a visa to the information specialist. The office, given the lack of cooperation from Libyan authorities, does not have much in terms of funding or other resources.

¶4. (U) An estimated 30,000 Palestinian refugees live in Libya according to Alwash. He said they don't have a "protection" problem. The Palestinians have trouble finding employment and housing or registering newborn children. Most of the Palestinians carry Jordanian, Syrian, Lebanese or Egyptian documentation that is difficult if not impossible to renew. The documentation is critical to the refugees ability to find work, especially now that Libya institutes regular "sweeps" to deport illegal laborers. UNHCR concentrates its efforts on

helping refugees work with local consulates to get new identity papers.

15. (U) Alwash said Libya's principal challenge was illegal immigrants, especially sub-Saharan Africans. His contacts reported that 590 illegal immigrants traveled from Libya to Malta during September, and great numbers also travel to Italy and other Mediterranean countries. The September figure is considered representative of an average monthly immigration flow. When Alwash has the cooperation of the Libyan authorities, he hopes to make arrangements for USCIS to visit and assess the refugee population. He thought that 2007 was the most likely time for a first USCIS trip to Libya. In the meantime, Alwash has said he might ask for USG assistance with one particular resettlement case. (Comment: We expect that any USCIS visit here would be preceded by a visit from the Regional Refugee Coordinator. End Comment)

16. (U) While it could take months to finalize an MOU, Alwash is currently focusing on coordination with local "NGOs". The term is in quotes because the Libyan NGOs all report to the Jamarhiyah government bureaucracy at some level. Alwash utilizes the Al-Wahfa Society to implement some part of the UNHCR care and maintenance program for refugees. He is also trying to form a partnership with the Al-Qadhafi Foundation for Charitable Activities (under the direction of Qadhafi's son, Saif al-Islam) and the Watasimo Foundation (under the direction of Qadhafi's daughter, Aisha). Alwash is also coordinating to some degree with the World Islamic Call Society (WICS), which he described as "generally helpful." Under the sponsorship of one of these organizations, Alwash plans to hold a conference on refugee issues during the second half of 2006.

17. (C) December 18, Alwash told USLO that he was optimistic about the future. Based on recent conversations with Libyan officials, Alwash doesn't think an MOU will be signed anytime soon, but he does get a sense that there is a general "reconsidering" of their point of view.

18. (C) Biographic Note: Mohamed Hantosh Alwash, a Canadian citizen of Iraqi origin, in his forties, represents the UNHCR in Tripoli. He previously served in Tripoli during the 1980s, as well as in Geneva, Beirut and Amman. During his previous assignment in Tripoli, he worked on the repatriation issues dealing with Palestinians and Egyptians. He has two children enrolled in a French-language local school.

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